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A N S W E R S

THE OLD TESTAMENT

20 Answers
—
The Old Testament

Jimmy Akin



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The Old Testament is not just the first part of the Bible; it's also the largest. In fact, it's more than three times as long as the New Testament. Despite this, it is far less well-known. Many Christians skip it entirely and go straight to the New Testament.

This is understandable, since the latter scriptures are the most relevant to us today. However, it's also a problem, because the Old Testament provides the essential background for the New. For the first Christians, including the apostles, the books of the Old Testament *were* the scriptures, and they understood their Christian faith as the ultimate fulfillment of everything the Old Testament had been striving toward.

You can't understand the Gospels, the epistles, or the book of Revelation—much less how Jesus fulfilled God's plan of the ages—without the Old Testament. Yet for many today, its pages are a *terra incognita*, an unknown land. Although there is no substitute for reading the Old Testament for yourself, this short book will answer basic questions about it and help you understand the fundamentals of this treasure of our Faith.

1. What is the Old Testament?

Simply put, the Old Testament is the collection of inspired books that God gave the Jewish people prior to the time of Christ.

The precise books that it contains are debated by Jews and Christians (see answer 14), but for Catholics it contains forty-six books. The first of these—Genesis—opens by describing the creation of the world, and the last to be written—probably Wisdom—was likely penned in the first century B.C. or even the early first century A.D. All told, its books were written over a period of about a thousand years.

The Old Testament takes its name from the covenant God made with the Jewish people. *Testament* is another word for covenant, and during the course of history, God made covenants with and through a number of individuals, including Abraham, Moses, and David.

To Abraham, God gave the promise that he would become the father of a

multitude, and this promise was fulfilled in a special way through the people of Israel. Through Moses, God gave Israel his law for their nation. And to David, God gave the promise of an eternal kingdom, which was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

A special moment came around 600 B.C., when the prophet Jeremiah revealed that God would create a new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:31–33).

On the night of his passion, Jesus announced the fulfillment of this prophecy, stating:

This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood (Luke 22:20).

Christians thus saw Jesus as inaugurating the New Covenant that Jeremiah had prophesied, and the books written about Jesus by the apostles and their associates came to be known as the books of the New Covenant or the *New Testament*. By contrast, the books that covered God's former dealings with the Israelites came to be known as the books of the Old Covenant or the *Old Testament*.

Although it is very common in our culture, the term *Old Testament* frequently is not used in Jewish circles, since it presupposes the Christian understanding of the New Covenant. Instead, these books are often called the *Jewish Scriptures*, the *Hebrew Scriptures*, or the *Tanakh*—an acronym based on the threefold classification of these books as the Law (*Torah*), the

Prophets (*Neviim*), and the Writings (*Kethuvim*).

This way of classifying the books of the Old Testament is commonly used in Jewish circles today, but it is not the only way of grouping them. In the New Testament era, it was common to use a twofold division, distinguishing between “the law and the prophets” (Matt. 5:17, 7:12, 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; Rom. 3:21)—that is, between the Pentateuch and everything else.

Today it is common to divide the books of the Old Testament into several groups, including the Pentateuch, the historical books, the wisdom literature, and the prophets. We will discuss each of these categories.

Another way of dividing them is between the protocanonical (“first canon”) and deuterocanonical (“second canon”) books. The former refers to the books that are considered canonical in Jewish and Protestant circles and the latter to the additional books considered canonical by Catholics and Eastern Christians.

The original language of the Israelites was Hebrew, and most of the Old Testament was written in this language. However, after they were conquered by the Babylonians around 587 B.C., many Jews began to speak Aramaic, and so small portions of the Old Testament are written in that language. Finally, following the conquests of Alexander the Great around 330 B.C., many Jews began to speak Greek, and a few of the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament were written in that language, just as the New Testament is. In addition, a major translation of the entire Old Testament, known as the *Septuagint*, was produced for the benefit of Greek-speaking Jews.

2. How do we know that the text of the Old Testament is accurate?

Given the age of the Old Testament books, people sometimes ask how we know we have accurate texts. After all, before the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, books had to be hand-copied by scribes, who invariably make at least small mistakes. After so many centuries of hand-copying,

could serious errors have been introduced into the text?

Could some of them even have been introduced deliberately, in the service of some theological agenda, perhaps by people who purposely suppressed certain texts?

Several factors worked to prevent this. The first is the fact that the books of the Old Testament are considered sacred. This meant that scribes took great pains not to make mistakes when copying them, and to quickly fix mistakes if they did.

In particular, a group of Jewish scribes known as the *Masoretes* were active in Palestine and Babylonia between around A.D. 600 and 950. They developed elaborate procedures for the accurate copying of the Hebrew scriptures. The version they produced—known as the *Masoretic Text*—served as the basis of later versions of the Old Testament.

The fundamental accuracy of the Masoretic Text was confirmed in the 1940s with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These were hidden in caves surrounding the Dead Sea in Palestine during the First Jewish Revolt in the A.D. 60s, and they contained copies of Old Testament scriptures, some of which have been carbon-dated to centuries before Christ. Suddenly scholars had access to copies of biblical books from the Old Testament period itself, and they confirmed that the text had not been fundamentally altered.

Though it is a Greek translation, the Septuagint also played a role in preserving knowledge of what the biblical text originally said. So did translations into other languages, such as the Old Latin versions that preceded St. Jerome's Vulgate translation, as well as the Vulgate itself. We thus have many ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament books in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and other languages. Each of these allows scholars a way to cross-check what the originals said.

In addition to Old Testament manuscripts, we have many quotations of the Old Testament from ancient authors, such as the Jewish rabbis, who wrote extensive commentaries on the texts. Similarly, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus uses a great deal of material from the Old Testament in

his monumental history *Jewish Antiquities*. Even the Church Fathers quote frequently from the Old Testament in their writings.

Of course, scribes did make mistakes, but they were minor, and today scholars have a wealth of material they can use to establish what the original text of the Old Testament was. A special science—known as textual criticism—has even developed to allow scholars to do this. And, although there are passages whose exact wording is debated, scholars are not in doubt that the texts we have are fundamentally accurate. There are too many independent and converging lines of evidence supporting it.

This also reveals how impossible it would have been for anyone to deliberately introduce false readings or suppress texts in the service of a theological agenda. Even if someone wanted to, copies of the Old Testament books were in too many hands.

If a Jewish group wanted to alter a passage they objected to, they would never be able to go through the entire Jewish world and get their coreligionists to take it out or alter it, and they certainly wouldn't be able to get Christians to take it out of their Bibles. The same would be true of a Christian group wanting to do this: too many other Christians would refuse to do so, and non-Christian Jews would never remove or alter an Old Testament passage on Christian say-so.

Further—precisely because the Dead Sea Scrolls were lost for almost two thousand years—*nobody* would have had the ability to tamper with them.

Thus there is no basis for challenging the fundamental reliability of the Old Testament text.

3. What is the Pentateuch?

The Pentateuch consists of the first five books of the Bible. Its name comes from the Greek word *pentateuchos*, which means a five-book work. It is also known by several other names:

- The Torah (Hebrew for “instruction”)
- The Five Books of Moses

- The Law of Moses
- The Law

The Pentateuch is the most fundamental part of the Old Testament—as important for Jews as the four Gospels are to Christians. It focuses on the origin of the people of Israel, how they came to possess the promised land, and God’s instructions for governing their national and religious life.

1) *Genesis* is the first book of the Pentateuch. Its name is a Greek word that means “creation” or “origin.” It’s an appropriate title because Genesis describes the creation of the world and the origins of God’s people, Israel.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are often referred to as the *primeval history*. A lot happens in these early chapters. Genesis 1 gives us a powerful account of the creation of the world in six days; Genesis 2 provides an account focusing specifically on the creation of man; Genesis 3 explains how man fell into sin and thus became subject to death; Genesis 4 records the first murder; and Genesis 5 explains how mankind began to spread over the earth.

Because man continued in his wicked ways, God decided to cleanse the world, and in Genesis 6–9 he sends the Great Flood to accomplish this goal, preserving the righteous man Noah and his family through the event. Through Noah, he allows the human race to begin again, promising never to send another great flood. Genesis 10 and 11 then tell how mankind spread once more, bringing us to the close of the primeval history.

We then meet Abraham, the first of the Old Testament patriarchs. His story runs from Genesis 12 to 25. Although Abraham is childless, God promises to give him many descendants, who would become a great nation. He also swore to give Abraham the promised land, and that he would become a blessing to all peoples.

These promises began to be fulfilled through Abraham’s son Isaac. The story of his miraculous birth is found in Genesis 17, and the events of his life are recorded in chapters 21 to 35.

The third of the great patriarchs is Isaac’s son Jacob. At one point, God

gives him the new name *Israel*. Peoples in the Ancient Near East were often named after one of their key ancestors, and so Jacob's descendants become known as the *nation of Israel*. The first generation of these descendants contains Jacob's twelve sons, who become the founding fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's story is the main focus of Genesis from chapter 25 to 36.

The final part of Genesis—from chapter 37 to 50—deals with Jacob's son Joseph. Because his brothers are jealous of him, Joseph is sold into slavery, but he rises to become a key official in Egypt. God uses these events to preserve both Jacob's family and many other people through a devastating famine. The book closes with the whole family reunited in Egypt, but with the assurance that God will eventually bring the family back to the promised land.

By our reckoning, the events of Genesis 12–50 would fall in the second millennium B.C., and the book as a whole covers the period from the creation of the world through the time of the patriarchs of Israel.

2) *Exodus* is the second book of the Pentateuch. Its name is a Greek word that means “departure” or “going out.” It tells the story of how the nation of Israel left Egypt and began its journey to the promised land.

The account begins several centuries after the time of Joseph. Although the latter had been a key official in the court of Pharaoh, eventually a new ruler arose who had no respect for the Hebrews, and who subjected them to slave labor. Because of the growing number of Israelites, Pharaoh devised a plan to weaken them as a people, demanding that newborn boys be put to death.

However, God providentially preserved the life of baby Moses and arranged for him to be brought up in Pharaoh's own household. As an adult, Moses defended one of his fellow Israelites, and took the life of an Egyptian in the process, leading him to flee to the neighboring land of Midian. There, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and commissioned him to return to Egypt and deliver his people from slavery (Exod. 3).

Moses returns and, in keeping with the instructions that God has given him, demands that Pharaoh release the Israelites so they can worship God in the desert. But Pharaoh refuses to do so. Consequently, God sends a series of ten plagues on the Egyptians, culminating in the death of every firstborn son. The Israelites, however, are protected from the plagues, including the last one. To avoid being visited by the angel of death, they smear lamb's blood on their doorposts and celebrate the first Passover meal (Exod. 12). Afterward, Pharaoh finally lets the people go.

He soon has a change of heart, and he and his army pursue the Israelites into the desert. But God miraculously parts the waters of the Red Sea (Heb., *yam suph*: literally, "Sea of Reeds") and allows the Israelites to escape. He then drowns Pharaoh and his army when they try to pursue their former slaves through the waters (Exod. 14).

The Israelites then journey in the wilderness in Sinai to the mountain of God. There they encounter a powerful, storm-like manifestation of God's presence, and he gives them the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20), as well as other instructions, and Moses ratifies their covenant with God (Exod. 24). They also receive the plans for the tabernacle—a tent that functioned as a portable temple—and instructions for the ceremonies to be performed in it (Exod. 25–31).

When the people see that Moses is spending a long time on the mountain, his own brother Aaron misguidedly builds a golden calf for the Israelites to worship, and God becomes angry with his people. Upon seeing what they have done, Moses is so aghast that he smashes the tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments, signifying how Israel had broken God's law (Exod. 32).

However, God renews his covenant with Israel, and has Moses create a new copy of the Ten Commandments. He also gives the people many more instructions through Moses, and the book closes with the construction of the tabernacle, and with Israel still on its journey to the promised land (Exod. 40).

3) *Leviticus* is the third book of the Pentateuch. Its name is based on a

Greek word that alludes to the tribe of Levi, to which the line of Jewish priests belonged. The book consists almost entirely of instructions about holiness. It records the regulations to be used for making sacrifices (Lev. 1–7), laws regarding clean and unclean things (Lev. 11–16), and practical instructions for holiness (Lev. 17–27). It contains very little narrative material, the most significant example being the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, and the early events of their priesthood (Lev. 8–10).

4) *Numbers* is the fourth book of the Pentateuch. Its name is based on the fact that, at the beginning of the book and near its end, two censuses (“numberings” or countings) of the Israelites are taken. Although Numbers contains additional instructions regulating the life of Israel, it is primarily an account of the Israelites’ journey to the promised land.

A key turning point in this journey occurs when Moses sends spies into the promised land to see what the conditions are like. When ten of the twelve spies report that the inhabitants of the land are too strong for the Israelites to defeat, a great crisis in national morale occurs, the people lose faith in God’s promise, and he swears that this faithless generation will not enter the promised land. Instead, they wander in the desert for forty years and their children inherit the land (Num. 13–14).

At one point, even Moses becomes so frustrated with the Israelites that he disobeys God’s instructions, and God indicates he also would die before they entered the promised land (Num. 20).

God guides his people through many trials during the forty years of wandering, and at their conclusion, a second census is taken (Num. 26) and other preparations are made for the Israelites’ arrival in the promised land (Num. 27–36).

5) *Deuteronomy* is the fifth book of the Pentateuch. Its name is based on a Greek word that means “second law.” It takes the form of a farewell discourse by Moses, because he is preparing to die and the people are preparing to enter the promised land. He reviews the history of God’s dealings with his people (Deut. 1–4), instructs the new generation in God’s law (Deut. 5–28), and renews his covenant with them (Deut. 29–30). The

book then closes with a description of the events leading up to and including Moses' death (Deut. 31–34).

4. How should we understand Old Testament laws?

The laws that God gives in the Pentateuch can be classified in more than one way.

In the Jewish Talmud (a collection of commentaries on them), there are said to be 613 laws, which are divided into 248 positive commandments (“do this”) and 365 negative commandments (“don’t do this”). Since both of these numbers have symbolic significance (248 involving increasing multiples of two, and 365 being the number of days in a year), it is hard to avoid seeing this system as somewhat artificial. This is also suggested by the fact that Jewish scholars have given different lists of what the 613 commandments are. A numbering proposed by the medieval sage Moses Maimonides (c. 1135–1204) has been influential, but other Jewish scholars have proposed different collections.

Christian scholars have often proposed a threefold division of the laws (see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II:99:2–3). According to this system, the laws in the Pentateuch can be divided into three general categories:

- Moral precepts
- Ceremonial precepts
- Judicial (or civil) precepts

The moral precepts are expressions of basic ethical principles. Examples include “You shall not kill” (Exod. 20:13) and “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14).

The ceremonial precepts deal with the worship of God, the Israelites’ religious activities, and the rituals they were to employ. Examples include the requirement of circumcision, the celebration of Passover and other feasts, dietary and other laws distinguishing between ritually clean and

unclean things, and the way different types of sacrifices were to be offered.

The judicial precepts regulated aspects of Israel's civil life as a nation. Examples include establishing cities of refuge where people who accidentally killed a person could flee to find asylum (Num. 35:9–15), how much people should be fined for particular offenses (Exod. 22:1–15), the number of witnesses needed to convict someone of a crime (Deut. 19:15), and the penalties to be applied to false witnesses (Deut. 19:16–19).

Because the moral precepts are part of natural law, they apply to all peoples in all times. The other two kinds of precepts—the ceremonial and judicial—were given specifically to the people of Israel and were not binding on other nations. Thus Gentiles do not have to be circumcised or establish cities of refuge (*Summa Theologiae* I–II:98:5).

Of special note are the Ten Commandments. These express key moral principles, but there also is a ceremonial element, particularly in the requirement to keep the Sabbath (Saturday) holy. The underlying moral requirement is to devote adequate time to rest and worship, but this is fulfilled in the Christian age on Sunday, “the Lord’s day” (Rev. 1:10; cf. 1 Cor. 16:2). The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* notes:

The other commandments of the Decalogue are precepts of the natural and perpetual law, under all circumstances unalterable, whence, notwithstanding the abrogation of the Law of Moses, all the commandments contained in the two tables are observed by the Christian people, not because Moses so commanded, but because they agree with the law of nature, by the dictates of which men are impelled to their observance . . .

Whereas this commandment, touching the sanctification of the Sabbath, if considered as to the time of its observance, is not fixed and unalterable, but susceptible of change, and belongs not to the moral but ceremonial law. Neither is it a natural principle, for we are not taught or formed by nature to give external worship to God on the Sabbath rather than on any other day; but from the time the people of Israel were liberated from the

bondage of Pharaoh, they observed the Sabbath day (3:4:4).

5. Why do some Old Testament laws seem harsh?

Some of the laws found in the Pentateuch seem harsh by contemporary standards. For example, the death penalty is prescribed for a wider variety of offenses than it is used for today.

One reason for this is that ancient Israel did not have an extensive prison system, and so there were fewer alternatives for dealing with criminals. They could not be safely kept away from society on a long-term basis, and if temporary measures like fines or flogging would be ineffective or inappropriate for an offense, the death penalty was deemed an appropriate alternative.

In general, the ancient world was a violent place, and God was only beginning to work with the Israelites, who were creatures of their time. Their culture belonged to the ancient world, and it could not change overnight. This limited what God could do in teaching them his ways.

Thus Jesus comments that Moses gave the Israelites certain laws—such as the ability to divorce their wives by giving them a certificate of divorce—because of “your hardness of heart” (Mark 10:5). In other words, the Israelites wouldn’t have been prepared to accept a more demanding standard.

We see the same principle at work in an often-misunderstood law dealing with captive brides taken in wartime (Deut. 21:10–14). Rather than being an endorsement of the practice of capturing women in war and marrying them, the law seeks to mitigate the harm done by this ancient practice by imposing requirements on the captor designed to make the woman unattractive to him, with the aim of letting the woman go free “since you have humiliated her” (Deut. 21:14).

Among the most criticized passages in Old Testament law are those that prescribe “eye for an eye” punishments. However, properly understood, the passages express a principle of justice and sought to promote the common

good.

Three passages mention the “eye for an eye” principle: Exodus 21:22–25, Leviticus 24:17–21, and Deuteronomy 19:16–21. The first deals with the case of men who are fighting and accidentally injure a pregnant woman, causing a miscarriage. The second deals with a man who attacks and maims another. The third deals with a witness who lies in court to harm an innocent person. In each passage a similar formula occurs: “you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exod. 21:23–25).

Note that these passages are intended to be used by a court when a crime has been committed. They aren’t instructions telling people to take personal revenge. The point of having a court system is to *prevent* people from doing that by ensuring justice is done when an innocent party is harmed.

If people take their own revenge, they often do so excessively. A person who has been wounded or seen a loved one wounded may *kill* the perpetrator. Courts exist to keep this from happening. To do their job properly, courts need to be seen as administering justice fairly. If they are seen as being too lenient, people may take matters into their own hands. Thus the “eye for an eye” passages. They direct courts to let the punishment fit the crime, which is a fundamental principle of justice. This promoted the common good and order of society by discouraging people from taking their own revenge.

In a world without an extensive prison system, this may have literally meant “an eye for an eye,” though not always. Numbers 35:31 specifies that no ransom can be accepted in a case of murder, suggesting that in lesser cases the guilty party could pay compensation. A person thus might avoid “an eye for an eye” if he provided appropriate compensation to the injured party.

Justice can also be tempered by mercy in other ways. Thus, Jesus counseled individuals to “turn the other cheek” rather than pressing for “eye for an eye” justice (Matt. 5:38–39), and it was through Jesus that God’s ultimate will was revealed.

6. Why did God give the Israelites ceremonial laws?

Ritual and ceremony are human universals. Every culture has rituals—both secular and religious—that its members observe, from ways of greeting one another to ways of saying goodbye, and everything in between. People all over the world celebrate special days, have rites commemorating birth and death, and have ways of honoring God—or at least the gods they worship. Consequently, it was only natural for God to incorporate rituals and ceremonies into the instructions he gave his people Israel.

One function the ceremonial precepts of the Law performed was making Israel holy. This was one of the key goals of the Pentateuch: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6).

The Hebrew word for “holy”—*qadōsh*—does not just mean morally pure. It also means set apart from common things as something sacred. By giving the Israelites ceremonial precepts, God marked them off as separate from all the other peoples of the earth, as his own special possession—a nation specially consecrated to him.

This is a key reason behind the various purity laws in the Old Testament. Although, in the absolute sense, nothing God has made is unclean and no food defiles a man (Mark 7:14–23), by giving the Israelites dietary laws, God made them culturally separate from the peoples that surrounded them. Israelites could not eat things that their Gentile neighbors could, which helped create a cultural wall around them. This not only reinforced their identity as a distinct people dedicated to God, but it also helped protect them from temptations to worship the gods of the Gentiles, since they could not accept invitations to eat with pagans.

Similarly, there was a requirement that only Israelites could eat the Passover meal. If a foreigner wanted to eat it, all the males of his household had to be circumcised and become like native Israelites (Exod. 12:48). This also helped protect against mingling religious observances with pagans and

their practices.

The same principle of keeping the Israelites distinct is found in many other ceremonial requirements of the Law. Unlike the Gentiles, the Israelites could not cut the edges off their beards (Lev. 19:27), have tattoos (Lev. 19:28), or wear clothes made by mixing wool and linen fibers (Deut. 22:11). In this way, the Israelites would even be visually distinct from their neighbors.

Many things that the Israelites encountered in everyday life could make them ceremonially unclean, requiring them to take a ritual bath to become clean again (Lev. 11:25, 15:5, 16, 18, 21, 22:6, and elsewhere). These practices not only reinforced Israelite cultural identity, but they also taught a deeper lesson that one must separate oneself from what is morally unclean. The ceremonial purity requirements of the Mosaic Law thus pointed to the realm of moral purity as well.

Finally, these aspects of the Law of Moses also pointed forward to Christ and the “law of Christ” that he would reveal (1 Cor. 9:21, Gal. 6:2). Thus the ceremonial baths pointed forward to Christian baptism, and the Passover meal pointed forward to Christ—the ultimate “Lamb of God” (John 1:29)—so that St. Paul can say, “Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:7–8).

7. What are the historical books?

The historical books of the Old Testament are those that record the history of Israel after the time of Moses’ death. Here we will cover the historical books that are found in the Hebrew Bible. Those that belong to the deuterocanonical books will be covered later.

1) *Joshua* is the first of the historical books. It begins immediately after Moses and describes the conquest of the Holy Land under the leadership of his successor, Joshua the son of Nun. The book concludes with Joshua

telling the Israelites that they need to decide which gods they will serve, and the people reaffirm their loyalty to the Lord, the God who brought them up from the land of Egypt and fulfilled his promises by giving them the land (Josh. 24:14–28).

From a Christian perspective, the figure of Joshua has a special significance. The name *Yehōshua* is the Hebrew equivalent of *Jesus*, and Jesus is in a special way the successor of Moses, who leads God's people into the spiritual promised land.

2) *Judges* deals with the time in Israel's history before they had a king. In this period, God raised up warrior chieftains known as *judges* to defend his people against foreign aggression. These judges came from different tribes, in keeping with Israel's nature as a tribal confederacy rather than a nation with a centralized government. The story of Judges reveals how, when Israel sinned, God would allow them to be defeated at the hands of their enemies, but he would ultimately send them saviors in the form of judges who would restore peace to the land. The judges themselves are described honestly, with a frank recognition of their flaws. Famous—and flawed—judges include Jephthah, who made a foolish vow (Judg. 11:30–40), and Samson, who foolishly married a pagan woman (Judg. 14:1–10), slept with a harlot (Judg. 16:1–3), and became infatuated with Delilah, leading to his downfall (Judg. 16:4–31).

3) *Ruth* is a more positive book. It is only four chapters long, but it reveals the touching story of a pagan woman who turns to the God of Israel and ends up becoming the grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:13–17) and thus an ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

The longest of the historical books are those of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. Originally, each of these was written as a single book, but in our Bibles today they have each been split in two, producing 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

4) *1 Samuel* tells the story of the last of Israel's judges, Samuel, and the appointing of its first king, Saul. Although Samuel was a righteous judge, Saul disobeyed God and fell from his favor as king. This led to the rise of

David, whose early adventures are related in this book.

5) *2 Samuel* picks up the story just after Saul's death, and David becomes king in his stead. David is a key figure in Israel's history, and this book records the main events of his reign, including God's establishing a covenant with him and promising that his descendants would have an everlasting reign (2 Sam. 7). This promise was ultimately to be fulfilled through the everlasting reign of Jesus, the "Son of David" (Matt. 22:42). However, David also had flaws, and the book records his affair with Bathsheba and how David engineered the death of her husband (2 Sam. 11). The book ends with an account of how David faltered in his trust of God by taking a census of Israel's fighting men (2 Sam. 24).

6) *1 Kings* begins by relating the final days of King David, and how Solomon became his successor. The book then recounts the events of Solomon's reign and how, because of his sins, the kingdom was broken in two during the reign of his son Rehoboam. The ten northern tribes seceded from the tribal union to become the kingdom of Israel, leaving two tribes—Judah and Benjamin—as the southern kingdom of Judah. Each then had its own line of kings, and the book takes us up through the reigns of Jehoshaphat of Judah and Ahaziah of Israel (c. 853 B.C.). A major figure toward the end of the book is the prophet Elijah.

7) *2 Kings* continues the story of Elijah and introduces his successor, the prophet Elisha. It also covers the period leading up to the conquest of both the northern and southern kingdoms. Because Israel went after other gods, the Lord allowed them to be conquered by the Assyrian empire in 723 B.C., during the reign of the northern king Hoshea, and its people were taken into exile (2 Kings 17). Later, because of its own unfaithfulness to God, the kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., during the reign of King Zedekiah (2 Kings 25). The Jerusalem temple was destroyed, and the population was deported, leading to the Babylonian Exile.

1 and 2 Chronicles cover much of the same ground as 1 Samuel through 2 Kings, but they tell it from a different perspective, just as the four Gospels

recount the events of Jesus' ministry from different perspectives.

8) *1 Chronicles* begins with an extensive genealogy that stretches back to Adam (1 Chron. 1–9), and then describes the end of the reign of King Saul. It then records the events of the reign of King David, ending with the coronation of his son Solomon.

9) *2 Chronicles* describes Solomon's reign and the subsequent kings of Judah, leading up to the conquest of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. One difference between 2 Chronicles and the books of Kings is that it focuses primarily on Judah and does not offer as detailed a history of the northern kingdom of Israel. The book also ends on a more hopeful note, describing the end of the Exile during the reign of Cyrus the Persian (2 Chron. 36:22–23) in the 530s B.C.

Two books that explore this period in more detail are Ezra and Nehemiah. Originally, these also formed part of a single book, but they are separated in modern Bibles.

10) *Ezra* begins with the decree of Cyrus allowing exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. After the temple is rededicated, the book focuses on the activity of Ezra, a priest and scribe, and his ministry helping the people of Judah restore their national and religious life, including the sending away of pagan wives the men had taken.

11) *Nehemiah* focuses on another returning exile, who was a cupbearer for the Persian king Artaxerxes I. He is allowed to travel to Jerusalem and help the Judahites rebuild and restore their national life. His ministry overlaps that of Ezra, and the book—which contains a first-person narrative by Nehemiah himself—concludes around the year 428 B.C.

12) *Esther* is the final book of the Hebrew Bible often grouped with the historical books. It is set during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes I, in the 470s B.C. It tells the story of how its heroine and her elder cousin and guardian Mordecai thwart a genocidal plan against the Jewish people. Although it is grouped with the historical books, modern scholars debate its precise relationship with history. According to Pope St. John Paul II, this book—as well as Tobit and Judith—“although dealing with the history of

the chosen people, have the character of allegorical and moral narrative rather than history properly so called” (*General Audience*, May 8, 1985).

8. Why are there so many violent and sinful acts in the Old Testament?

Because it is honest about the ancient world. People then lived in very violent times, and the historical record of the period naturally reflects that. Warfare was so common that in many places, every year when the weather allowed, new conflicts would break out. The Old Testament even refers to spring as “the time when kings go forth to battle” (2 Sam. 11:1, 1 Chron. 20:1).

The records of our time also report violence. A typical newspaper does so every day. A newspaper’s job is to report significant things that happened. That doesn’t mean it approves. Newspapers report rapes, murders, and crimes the papers do not approve of. They also report people saying and doing things that the paper’s reporters and editors completely disagree with.

Similarly, just because Scripture records something doesn’t mean it endorses it. It does mean the biblical author thought the event was significant for his audience to know, but it doesn’t mean that he—or God—approved. Scripture records the words and actions of the devil, but the devil’s activities are strongly disapproved of.

Thus when Jephthah makes a rash vow that apparently leads to his daughter being sacrificed as a burnt offering (Judg. 11:30–40), the audience is meant to understand his action as barbarous and horrific. Jephthah is only one example of Scripture’s brutal honesty about the leaders of Israel, who were often deeply flawed. Even respected figures like David and Solomon have their blackest sins reported (2 Sam. 11; 1 Kings 11:1–13).

Consequently, one cannot simply note that Scripture *reports* someone saying or doing something abominable and conclude that it *teaches* something abominable. When evaluating such passages, one must ask whether the proposed evil is condemned.

Sometimes, there will be an explicit condemnation (thus the biblical

author condemns Solomon's idolatry: 1 Kings 11:9–10). Other times, the condemnation will be implicit, but clues in the text reveal the disapproval (as when the daughters of Israel mourn what Jephthah did: Judges 11:39–40). Or disapproval can be inferred because the action is condemned elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., even if David's adultery wasn't explicitly condemned in 2 Sam. 12, we would know his act was wrong because it violates the Ten Commandments: Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18).

Finally, our native moral sense can be a clue to the biblical author's disapproval (e.g., even though David didn't personally kill Uriah the Hittite, he engineered the man's death, and even without the explicit condemnation in 2 Samuel 12, the audience would sense he violated the biblical prohibition on killing). In general, when our moral sense tells us that something Scripture reports is problematic, it is a clue that Scripture may disapprove also.

9. What is wisdom literature?

The wisdom literature is a collection of books that are neither straightforward historical narratives nor straightforward prophetic texts. They are frequently of a poetic character and deal with a variety of themes, often philosophical, making them sources of scriptural wisdom. Here we will look at the five books of wisdom literature found in the Hebrew Bible. Additional books of wisdom are found among the deuterocanonical books and will be discussed later.

1) *Job* is a poetic book that contains a meditation on human suffering—part of the philosophical problem of evil. In it, God allows Job—a righteous man—to suffer a series of calamities. In response, Job is visited by three friends who propose different solutions for why these things have happened to him. Ultimately, God himself intervenes, and the book acknowledges that it is a mystery why innocent people sometimes suffer, but it is allowed as part of God's plan. In the end, God rewards Job for his humility and restores his fortunes.

2) *The Psalms* are a collection of hymns, many of which are associated with King David. They contain many expressions of praise, thanksgiving, and petition directed to God; and reflect many circumstances in life, from exaltation and triumph to sorrow and penitence. The Psalms were used as hymns in the Jerusalem temple and in the broader life of Israel.

3) *Proverbs* is primarily a collection of short, wise sayings (i.e., proverbs). These form the bulk of the book, though the first nine chapters are discourses that focus on the importance of wisdom. After these, the proverbs themselves begin, often taking the form of two-part statements—e.g., “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother” (Prov. 10:1). The book as a whole is associated with King Solomon (Prov. 1:1), though sections of the book are also attributed to other authors (Prov. 25:1, 30:1, 31:1). One of the key themes of the book is the reverence due to God: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7).

4) *Ecclesiastes* is known by more than one name. Its title is very similar to the name of one of the deuterocanonical books—Ecclesiasticus (i.e., Sirach)—and so today it is often referred to by its Hebrew title, *Qōheleth*, a term translated “the Preacher” in most English versions. The author is described as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccles. 1:1) and is often identified as Solomon. The book itself is a meditation on the apparent futility of life: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Eccles. 1:2–3). Despite this seemingly negative outlook, the author recognizes that “there is nothing better for [men] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it is God’s gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil” (Eccles. 3:12–13).

5) *Song of Solomon* also goes by more than one name. It is also called the *Song of Songs* (i.e., the greatest song) and *Canticles*. It is associated with King Solomon (Song of Sol. 1:1), and it is devoted to the theme of love between a man and a woman. It is often compared to modern love poetry,

though as its title indicates, it was meant to be a musical composition, and it is known to have been sung aloud by people in the ancient world.

10. How should we interpret the wisdom literature?

Because the books of wisdom literature belong to five different genres, they each present their own interpretive challenges and opportunities.

For example, the various human figures who speak in Job (e.g., the title character and his three friends) struggle to understand the problem of innocent suffering, and as they do so they propose ideas that are flawed in different ways. This means that one cannot simply take any of them as entirely reliable, though the speeches contain recognizable elements of truth. This reflects the fact that, in this life, we can only partially understand the mystery of suffering (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 324).

The Psalms are poetic compositions, which means they contain many nonliteral figures of speech—a fact modern interpreters must take into account. Because of the powerful voice they show in expressing praise and petition to God, they have been extraordinarily influential in the life and liturgy of the Church. Together with Deuteronomy and Isaiah, the Psalms are one of the three Old Testament books that the New Testament quotes most often.

One of the reasons for this is that the New Testament writers recognized that the Psalms operate on more than one level, and they frequently contain messianic prophecies that point forward to Jesus. Thus, Jesus himself quoted from Psalm 22, which begins “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1) and applied it to himself while he was suffering on the cross (Matt. 27:46). (It should be noted that in Psalm 22 the author expected himself to be ultimately vindicated by God—see Psalm 22:22–31—and we may infer that Jesus did not regard himself as truly abandoned by God, and expected to be vindicated by his resurrection from the dead.)

The fact that Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings has important implications for the way we interpret it. A wise saying is not the same thing

as a law, and whereas a law is meant to be obeyed in all (or almost all) circumstances, a wise saying may apply only in many situations.

Proverbs vividly illustrates this point by giving contrasting pieces of advice, such as when one verse says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself” (Prov. 26:4) and the very next verse states, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Prov. 26:5). By directly juxtaposing these two statements, Proverbs indicates that we must use judgment to wisely discern which course of action is appropriate in a particular circumstance.

Ecclesiastes, as an extended meditation on the meaning of life, poses special challenges for the interpreter. Together with Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is one of two books whose inclusion in the Old Testament can be very puzzling to modern readers. Its overall negative, at times despairing tone is remarkable, but despite this it places human experience in an overall framework that recognizes God’s role. Despite the challenges we face, the book concludes by saying, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccles. 12:13–14).

Finally, the interpretation of the Song of Solomon is very interesting. On the literal level, this book is a celebration of human love. However, Scripture operates on more than one level, and since early times it has also been understood in an allegorical way. Thus early Jewish interpreters saw it as a reflection of God’s love for Israel, and Christian interpreters have naturally seen it as reflecting Christ’s love for his Church. All three of these interpretations are compatible.

11. What are the Major Prophets?

The prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible are divided into two groups: the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. The former consist of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel. (The deuterocanonical book

of Baruch is sometimes grouped with them but will be discussed later.) They are called “major” because they include the longest prophetic books.

1) *Isaiah* lived in the 700s B.C. The book that bears his name is the longest prophetic book of the Old Testament. It is sixty-six chapters long, and scholars are generally agreed that chapters 1–39 collect oracles given by the original, eighth-century prophet.

However, based on various factors, most modern scholars proposed that chapters 40–66 were written by one or more later prophets. The Church has no teaching on this proposal one way or another, but recent popes—including John Paul II and Benedict XVI—have favored it. Thus John Paul II stated: “In the book that bears the prophet Isaiah’s name, scholars have identified various voices all of which are placed under the patronage of this great prophet who lived in the eighth century B.C.” (*General Audience*, April 2, 2003; cf. Benedict XVI, *Lenten Meeting with the Clergy of Rome*, February 22, 2007). From the Church’s perspective, the key thing is that the entire book of Isaiah was written under divine inspiration and is the word of God. Who wrote individual parts of it is regarded as a matter of history rather than a matter of faith.

Isaiah is a very significant book, and it is quoted more than any other prophetic book in the New Testament, which has literally hundreds of citations and allusions to it. Many of Isaiah’s prophecies deal with the coming conquest of Judah by Babylon and the resulting exile. However, the book also contains messages relating to the post-captivity era and a new golden age. Finally, Isaiah describes a future era in which God will make “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17, 66:22).

2) *Jeremiah* lived in the late 600s and early 500s B.C. His ministry began during the reigns of the final kings of Judah and continued into the Babylonian Exile. Jeremiah was assisted in ministry by a man named Baruch, who was his scribe and friend. Because of his sorrowful message and the strong emotion he shows, Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet.”

The book of Jeremiah is the second longest of the Major Prophets,

comprising fifty-two chapters. It is challenging in that it is not written in chronological order, but it contains many accounts of incidents in Jeremiah's life, giving us more knowledge of this prophet and his struggles than we have of others.

A major theme in Jeremiah is the need for the people to repent to avoid God's judgment. However, when they refuse to do so, the doom becomes certain. Jeremiah then makes great efforts to get the people to accept the conquest by Babylon as God's will and as his judgment on their sins. But they refuse to comply, and Jeremiah is persecuted.

Jeremiah is known for prophesying a period of "seventy years" in connection with the Exile (25:11–12, 29:10). It is unclear whether the prophecy means that Babylon's dominance would last seventy years, that Judah's captivity would last seventy years, or both (in view of prophecies having more than one fulfillment). Scholars have proposed a number of possible fulfillments of this prophecy, including the seventy years between the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 586 B.C. and the dedication of the rebuilt temple in 515 B.C.

3) *Lamentations* is a short book. It consists of five chapters, each of which is a lament or sorrowful poetic composition. They mourn the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and though the book does not identify its author, it is historically attributed to Jeremiah and so grouped with the Major Prophets.

4) *Ezekiel* was active in the 500s. It appears that Ezekiel was taken into captivity after Nebuchadnezzar's second assault on Jerusalem, in 597 B.C. (see 2 Kings 24:10–16). This was before the destruction of the temple, which occurred in a later assault (2 Kings 25:8–9). In the interim, the prophet was relocated to a colony of Jewish exiles on the Chebar canal in Mesopotamia, where he received his prophetic call (Ezek. 1–3).

His book is the third longest of the Major Prophets, comprising forty-eight chapters. During his ministry, Ezekiel is directed to carry out a number of unusual prophetic actions to signify the situation between God and his people (e.g., not engaging in the usual mourning customs after the death of

his wife). Ezekiel gives various oracles against the nations that oppress Israel, and he experiences a number of famous visions, including visions of the glory of God (1:4–28), the valley of dry bones (37:1–28), and a restored temple and nation of Israel (40:1–48:35).

5) *Daniel* was a young Judean nobleman taken into captivity following Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem in 605 B.C. (Dan. 1:1–7). He was active as a prophet until the reign of Darius I, who came to power in 521 B.C.

The book of Daniel is the shortest of the Major Prophets. It has two editions—a twelve-chapter edition considered canonical by Jews and Protestants, and a fourteen-chapter edition considered canonical by Catholics and Orthodox. Unusually, the book is not written in just one language. The shorter edition contains passages in both Hebrew and Aramaic, and the longer edition also contains passages in Greek (though these are likely translations of Hebrew or Aramaic originals).

The book does not claim to be written by the prophet. The narrative sections are written in the third person. However, several prophetic sections are written in the first person and thus are ascribed to Daniel.

The revelations in Daniel involve a succession of kingdoms or empires that had power in the period after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. As the book progresses, attention is drawn to the conquests of Alexander the Great, the four kingdoms his empire gave rise to, and the Greek-speaking ruler Antiochus IV (i.e., “Antiochus Epiphanes”; reigned 175–164 B.C.), who persecuted the Jewish people. These events track with those recorded in the books of the Maccabees.

12. What are the Minor Prophets?

The Minor Prophets are a group of twelve short books by or about prophets who were active between roughly the 800s and the 400s B.C. In the ancient world, they were presented in a single scroll known simply as *The Twelve*. They can be briefly described as follows:

1) *Hosea* ministered in the 700s. He was from the northern kingdom of Israel. His ministry was based on a powerful prophetic action in that God directed him, “Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord” (Hos. 1:2). The marital drama that ensues forms an allegory for God’s relationship with his unfaithful, idolatrous people. The sins of Israel will eventually lead the northern kingdom into captivity by the Assyrians, but in his love, God will eventually take them back.

2) *Joel’s* dating is unclear, and little is known about the prophet’s personal background. The book deals with devastation left by a horde of locusts. It also focuses on “the day of the Lord” and how it will bring both judgment and mercy.

3) *Amos* ministered in the 700s. He came from a humble background, being an agricultural worker—“a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14). Although he was from Judah, he ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos preached against both foreign nations and God’s people—faulting the latter for failure to observe the Mosaic Law (Amos 2:4). He also condemned the haughty behavior of the rich with respect to the poor (Amos 8:4–6). Despite the judgment that would come upon the people, Amos prophesied an eventual restoration and period of prosperity (Amos 9:9–15).

4) *Obadiah’s* dating is unclear. It is the shortest book of the Old Testament, consisting of only a single chapter, and we are not given much information about the prophet. The book consists of an oracle of judgment against the nation of Edom, which was descended from Jacob’s brother Esau.

5) *Jonah* ministered in the 700s. He is sometimes called “the reluctant prophet” because he initially fled his prophetic mission, leading him to be swallowed by a “great fish” (Jon. 1:17). When he finally accepted his call, he went to the Assyrian city of Nineveh and prophesied its destruction. The Ninevites repented, and God called off the doom planned for the city. Jonah objected to this, but God stressed his love for all people—including the

Gentiles who lived in Nineveh.

6) *Micah* ministered in the 700s. He was from rural Judah and prophesied both about Samaria and Jerusalem (Mic. 1:1). The book contains a beautiful prophecy of the messianic age in which the Gentiles come to worship God (Mic. 4:1–5). The same passage is found in Isaiah (2:1–4), and it includes the famous prophecy of swords being beaten into plowshares. Micah also contains the famous prophecy of the coming Davidic king who will be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2).

7) *Nahum* likely ministered in the 600s. His prophecy is directed against the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Like Jonah, he prophesies its doom, but unlike in the time of Jonah, the Ninevites did not repent, and the city fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C.

8) *Habakkuk* likely ministered in the 600s. Habakkuk asks why God does not punish the wicked in Judea (Hab. 1:2–4), and God indicates he will use the Babylonians (Chaldeans) to punish them (Hab. 1:5–11). The prophet then asks how God can use such a wicked nation to do this (Hab. 1:12–17), and God replies that he will also punish the Babylonians for their sins (Hab. 2:1–20). The book is famous for the statement that “the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4; see also Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38).

9) *Zephaniah* ministered in the 600s. He is apparently a descendant of King Hezekiah (Zeph. 1:1) and describes God’s judgment as a virtual reversal of creation (Zeph. 1:2–3), brought on by the idolatry being committed in Judea (Zeph. 1:4–6). God will judge not only Judah but also the surrounding nations, as far south as Ethiopia and as far north as Assyria (Zeph. 2:12–15). But beyond this judgment there will be a time of joy and blessing in which God rules as King of Israel (Zeph. 3:15).

10) *Haggai* can be dated, very precisely, to the year 520 B.C., when God sent a message to the Jewish governor, Zerubbabel, by the mouth of the prophet. The Babylonian Exile was over, but people were saying the time had not yet come to finish rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, citing their poverty as a reason. God said it was not right for them to live in their houses while his house lay in ruins, and that if they would rebuild it, he

would pour out prosperity upon them.

11) *Zechariah* ministered at the same time as Haggai—520 B.C.—and afterward. The book of Zechariah is the longest of the Minor Prophets, and contains many unusual visions. It falls into two parts (chs. 1–8 and 9–14). In the first part, the prophet encourages the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple—like Haggai—and in the second part he delves deeper into the future, including the messianic age. The book is influential in the New Testament. It includes a text (Zech. 9:9) that foreshadows Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (cf. Matt. 21:5) and one that foretells the sorrow people will have when they look upon the messianic figure whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10; see also John 19:37; Rev. 1:7).

12) *Malachi* (Heb., “my [i.e., God’s] messenger”) may be either a personal name or the symbolic designation of an otherwise anonymous prophet. Malachi ministered around 500 B.C. or somewhat later, after the Jerusalem temple had been rebuilt and sacrifices had been restored. The prophet criticizes the people for offering blind and lame animals on God’s altar (Mal. 1:6–8). The book contains a prophecy that “Elijah” will be sent before the coming of the day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5–6)—a prophecy Jesus indicated was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt. 17:10–13; cf. Luke 1:17).

13. How should we interpret the prophets?

By its nature, prophecy can be difficult to interpret. It uses many symbols, and these can be taken in more than one way.

One of the perennial temptations of interpreters is to see the events of their own day—or of their near future—in prophetic texts. People have a tendency to assume that they are living during or just before major prophetic events. Thus there have been a series of people down through history who have thought that they were living at the end of the world, and they misread prophetic texts to support this view.

The key to understanding biblical prophecy is to determine its literal sense

—that is, what it meant in its original context, what the prophet was trying to communicate to his audience for their benefit. Normally Old Testament prophecies have their primary fulfillment within the generation to which they were given or within a few generations.

However, they can have additional fulfillments later in time. Thus many Old Testament prophecies have further fulfillments at the time of Christ. For example, the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 (“Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”) was a sign given to assure King Ahaz that enemy kings would not conquer him. For this prophecy to do its job, it needed to be fulfilled during his reign (732–716 B.C.). It therefore points, on the primary, literal level, to a child conceived at that time (perhaps Ahaz’s son, the future King Hezekiah).

This was as obvious to the evangelist Matthew as it is to us, but like the other New Testament authors, he knew prophetic texts can have multiple dimensions, and so he recognized that the prophecy *also* pointed to the virgin birth of Christ, who was “Immanuel” or—in Hebrew—“God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

Knowing all this, there are a series of principles to keep in mind when reading the Old Testament prophets:

- 1) The first thing we need to do is set aside expectations we have about the text. In particular, do not look to a text to validate a particular view you already hold. Ask what the text is saying, not what you want it to say.

- 2) To the best of your ability, identify who wrote a prophetic text, who the original audience was, and when it was composed. Sometimes this is difficult or can be done only within broad limits, but situating a text in its historical circumstance is very important.

- 3) Seek to establish the literal sense of the text by focusing on the words the author wrote and interpreting them in the historical context in which they were composed. Specifically, ask how these words would have been understood by the original audience.

- 4) Ask what overall message the prophet was trying to communicate to his audience. Bear in mind that this was not to satisfy *our* curiosity about our

future. The prophets sought to warn the Israelites about misbehavior, promise rewards for good behavior, assure them of God's love, and give them information about living through historical circumstances they would face. Which kind of message is being given in the text you are examining?

5) Ask which elements in the text are symbolic (or may be symbolic) and what these symbols likely mean—based on what this text says and how similar symbols are used elsewhere.

6) Look for clues in the text that give an idea of when the prophet and his audience would have expected the text to be fulfilled. Bear in mind that this would normally be within the prophet's own generation or within a few generations.

7) Ask which events occurring in that time frame could have fulfilled the prophecy. Sometimes it may not be possible to identify a specific event because many details of ancient history have been forgotten, but this does not mean there wasn't an event that fulfilled it. Look the passage up in commentaries to see what scholars have proposed as fulfillments.

8) Ask if there could have been additional fulfillments, because a symbol can sometimes point to more than one thing.

9) Having sought to establish the original, literal sense of the text, explore what spiritual senses may exist. At this point it is appropriate to use knowledge of how the text was applied in the New Testament. Since the New Testament is not an exhaustive commentary on the Old, it is also appropriate to consider whether there may be further fulfillments of the text (e.g., additional Christological interpretations).

This procedure will serve as a sound starting point for interpreting prophetic texts. Violating these principles is a recipe for misinterpreting, truncating, and distorting their meaning.

14. What are the deuterocanonical books?

The deuterocanonical books are works that are considered canonical by Catholics and many Eastern Christians, including the Orthodox, but not by

Protestants or modern Jews. Most were written in Hebrew or Aramaic, but they survive primarily in the Septuagint, the main Greek translation of the Old Testament. They consist of seven books, plus parts of two others.

1) *Tobit* tells the story of God's mercy on a righteous man and his family. The title character was deported to the city of Nineveh after the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. To aid them, God sends the angel Raphael, who travels in disguise in human form (cf. Gen. 19:1–3; Heb. 13:2) and brings them relief from the misfortunes they have suffered. Although set during a particular period of Israel's history, modern scholars have concluded based on clues in the text that the book has "the character of allegorical and moral narrative rather than history properly so called" (John Paul II, *General Audience*, May 8, 1985).

2) *Judith* describes how God used a righteous woman to deliver her people from the plots of their enemies. Judith's name means "Lady Jew," and she represents a female personification of the Jewish people. In the book she is pitted against a general sent by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who is nevertheless described as the king of the Assyrians (Jth. 1:1). We thus have the personification of God's people depicted in a conflict with their two greatest enemies—the Babylonians and the Assyrians. Because of this, scholars have concluded that Judith—like Tobit and Esther—has an allegorical rather than strictly historical character.

3) *1 Maccabees* is a straightforward historical book. It deals with the period after the Babylonian Exile and the conquests of Alexander the Great. When the latter died, his empire was divided, and one of the resulting kingdoms became a new persecutor of God's people. This persecution came to a head under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, who tried to stamp out Judaism, defiled the Jewish temple with pagan sacrifices, and put himself forward as a living god. This was too much for pious Jews to bear, and a rebellion began, leading to the establishment of an independent Jewish state under the leadership of a priestly family known as the Maccabees (also known as the Hasmoneans).

4) *2 Maccabees* is another historical book and recounts many of the same

events as 1 Maccabees, though from a different perspective, the same way the books of Chronicles offer a supplemental perspective on the events recorded in the books of Samuel and Kings.

5) *Wisdom*, also called the *Wisdom of Solomon*, is—as its title suggests—a work of wisdom literature. It is written in the voice of King Solomon, who serves as a symbol of great wisdom. Early Christian authors recognized this as a literary device, and it was most likely written by a learned man in the Jewish colony at Alexandria, Egypt, who wished to help Jewish people have a Hebrew perspective on the issues that confronted them, including Greek ideas they were encountering. It is probably the last of the Old Testament books to be written, being composed in the first century B.C. or the early first century A.D.

6) *Sirach* is known by several names. It is sometimes called *Ecclesiasticus* or the *Wisdom of Jesus ben-Sira*. It is a work of wisdom literature that was written in Hebrew by a man named Jesus the son of Sirach (Sir. 50:27) and translated by his grandson into Greek. Much of it resembles the book of Proverbs, and it contains a celebration of famed Jewish leaders down to Sirach's own time (c. 180 B.C.).

7) *Baruch* is a prophetic work attributed to Jeremiah's secretary of the same name and set during the Babylonian Exile (Bar. 1:1–4). It contains penitential prayers, wisdom material, and themes of lamentation and consolation. The sixth and final chapter of the book—sometimes called the *Letter of Jeremiah*—takes the form of a letter written by the prophet to the exiles in Babylon.

8) *Esther*, in its deuterocanonical edition, includes additional sections that bring out more clearly the role of God in delivering his people from calamity. (The Hebrew edition, strikingly, does not contain any explicit references to God.)

9) *Daniel*, in its deuterocanonical edition, includes several additional sections. One (“The Song of the Three Young Men”) is a hymn sung by Daniel's companions when they were placed in the fiery furnace. The other two (“Susannah” and “Bel and the Dragon”) display Daniel's wisdom and

show how God delivered him from danger.

15. How did the Old Testament canon develop?

The books of the Old Testament were written during a period stretching around a thousand years, and they were not the only books to be written in that time. The Old Testament even refers to additional works that are now lost (e.g., Num. 21:14; Josh. 10:13; 1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29, 12:15, 33:19). So how did the canon of the Old Testament develop?

It is widely agreed that the first group of books to achieve canonical status were those of the Pentateuch. These came to be recognized as the most important books of the Old Testament and were universally accepted as Scripture among the Jewish people. Some groups—such as the Sadducees and the Samaritans—appear to have had a canon that included *only* these books.

Over time, additional books came to be recognized as Scripture by major Jewish groups, though the canon did not have precise boundaries. One major group that arose in the centuries just before the time of Christ was the Pharisees. They recognized more books of Scripture than their counterparts, the Sadducees, though it took time for the canon that grew from their tradition to be solidified.

By the first century, the Pharisees appear to have recognized basically the same books that are found in modern Jewish Bibles (i.e., all of the protocanonical books). However, their successors—the rabbis—continued to dispute about several books for a few centuries after Christ. Some opposed the inclusion in Scripture of books like Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Ezekiel. These are sometimes referred to as the Old Testament *antilegomena* (Greek: “ones spoken against”). In addition, some rabbis favored including the deuterocanonical book of Sirach as Scripture.

Another group of first-century Jews was the sect that composed the Dead Sea Scrolls. Scholars generally believe them to have been a group known as

the *Essenes*, and it is clear from the scrolls they left behind that they broadly accepted the protocanonical books, with the possible exception of Esther. However, they also accepted certain additional works as Scripture, including 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and a work known as the *Temple Scroll*.

The Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes were all based in the Holy Land, which shows how even there Jews had a diversity of opinion about which books should be recognized as Scripture. But they were not the only Jewish groups of the time. In addition, there were many Greek-speaking Jews, both in the Holy Land and in the broader Roman world.

To meet the needs of these Greek speakers (referred to in the New Testament as “Hellenists”; see Acts 6:1), translations of the Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures were made. Originally a translation of the Pentateuch was made, and it became known as the Septuagint (Latin, *septuaginta*: “the seventy”) after a tradition that it was made by seventy translators. Over time, translations of additional Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures were made, including the rest of the books of the Hebrew Bible and the deuterocanonical books. A few of the latter (e.g., Wisdom) were even composed in Greek.

These books were influential in the Holy Land, including among the authors of the New Testament, who were primarily Jews born or raised in Palestine (e.g., Matthew, Mark, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude). The only author who definitely didn’t belong to this category was Luke.

In composing the New Testament, its authors overwhelmingly used the Septuagint when they quoted the Old Testament. Around eighty percent of the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are based on the Septuagint, and the New Testament authors also make allusions to the deuterocanonical books. (For example, Hebrews 11:35 refers to 2 Maccabees 7.)

As a result, the Septuagint canonical tradition was naturally taken over by the Christian community, including both Jewish and Gentile Christians. At the time, like the Pharisee canonical tradition, the Septuagint tradition had fuzzy boundaries, with some books floating on the edge of it. These

included additional works like 1 and 2 Esdras, 3 and 4 Maccabees, and the Prayer of Manasseh, which were not ultimately included in the Catholic canon.

Over the first few centuries of the Christian age, the Holy Spirit led the Church to recognize more clearly the books of the Old Testament canon, as well as those of the New Testament. This was done in a particular way through a series of local councils in North Africa in the late 300s and early 400s. Later, the ecumenical Council of Florence (1438–1445) authoritatively taught which books should be included in the Bible, and the Council of Trent (1545–1563) reaffirmed its teaching infallibly.

The reason that Trent needed to rule infallibly was that the Protestant Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther, had objected to certain Catholic teachings that were supported in the deuterocanonical books. They thus sought to deny these books scriptural status, and they appealed to the fact that contemporary European Jews (the only ones who they were aware of) did not include these books in their canon. The Protestant Old Testament canon thus uses only the protocanonical books.

However, contemporary European Jews were religiously descended—via the early rabbis—from the Pharisees, who represented only one strand of early Jewish opinion. Christians had received the broader Septuagint tradition that the New Testament authors used, and so Trent infallibly reaffirmed the Church's belief in the books of Scripture that the Church had historically recognized.

16. How does the Old Testament relate to history?

The Old Testament relates to history in more than one way. Some of its books do not present us with historical narrative at all. Many books of the wisdom literature (e.g., Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Wisdom, Sirach) do not use narrative, though they may occasionally refer to events in history (as with Sirach's celebration of famous Jewish leaders). This means that what we can learn about history from them is limited,

because telling us about history is not their primary purpose.

The prophets relate to history in a more direct way. The prophets lived in specific times, and their oracles refer backward to historical events (e.g., the sins of the people) and forward to future ones (e.g., coming divine judgment and the consolation and restoration that will follow it). However, they do so in a symbolic fashion that also limits what we can learn about history from them. Nevertheless, individual passages in the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah's descriptions of events that he experienced) can be very informative and fill in events not mentioned in the historical books.

Some books use narrative that at first glance looks like straightforward history, but clues in the text reveal that the reader was not meant to understand it in this way. Thus John Paul II stated: "The books of Tobit, Judith, and Esther, although dealing with the history of the chosen people, have the character of allegorical and moral narrative rather than history properly so called" (*General Audience*, May 8, 1985). These books thus function like extended parables, like the parables of Jesus but longer and with more detail. The wisdom book of Job, which is hard to locate in any particular period and is primarily written in the form of poetry, likely belongs in this class as well.

The books that relate to history in the most direct way are, of course, the historical books. Although we can learn things about history from each of the previous kinds of book, these are our richest source of historical information, because their primary purpose is to give us such information.

However, even then we have to be careful, because the ancient writers used methods of historiography that were common in their day rather than those of ours. This is particularly true of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which describe the remote origins of the human race and events taking place centuries (or longer) before the author wrote. These chapters pertain to history in a true sense, but they are written according to a set of literary conventions that conveys truth using more symbolism than later passages.

The Magisterium has indicated this for Genesis 1, stating, "Scripture

presents the work of the Creator symbolically as a succession of six days of divine ‘work,’ concluded by the ‘rest’ of the seventh day” (CCC 337). It has said the same for Genesis 3, stating, “The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man” (CCC 390).

The Magisterium has not yet similarly commented on other events in Genesis 1–11 (e.g., the Flood, the Tower of Babel), but it likely would take the same approach. Thus in 1950, Pius XII stated:

The first eleven chapters of Genesis, although properly speaking not conforming to the historical method used by the best Greek and Latin writers or by competent authors of our time, do nevertheless pertain to history in a true sense, which however must be further studied and determined by exegetes; the same chapters . . . in simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured, both state the principal truths which are fundamental for our salvation, and also give a popular description of the origin of the human race and the chosen people (*Humani Generis* 38).

One reason for the greater use of symbolism in these chapters is the remoteness of the events in time. This period is before Israel’s recorded history began, and truth concerning this period cannot be conveyed the same way it can for the period after detailed historical records began to be kept. A different set of literary conventions were thus used for describing the period before the arrival of Abraham in Genesis 12.

From Abraham to the time of Israel’s kings, less symbolism is used. And a more conventional way of recording history begins with the advent of the kings and the keeping of court records. Consequently, the later historical books provide historical information presented in the way most like modern works of history. Some Old Testament passages even represent first-person, eyewitness testimony, which historians today highly prize.

17. How does the Old Testament relate to the New?

The Old Testament provides the essential background needed to understand the New Testament. It is a tragedy that more Christians are not familiar with the books of the Old Testament. For the first Christians—including the authors of the New Testament—these books *were* the scriptures. They shaped their thought and life and informed their faith in a way that many modern Christians are almost completely unaware of, and not knowing the Old Testament is a frequent cause of misunderstanding things in the New Testament.

An obvious way that the Old Testament relates to the New is that it provides the historical background of Israel as God's chosen people. It contains the record of God's dealings with Israel and introduces numerous concepts that are referred to in the New Testament. Without its books, one would have no understanding of the significance of Jesus as the "Son of David."

Another way that the Old Testament relates to the New is by providing moral context. The moral principles found in the Pentateuch—and elsewhere in the Old Testament—are expressions of God's will that hold true in the New Testament age, and that inform the basic Christian moral vision. These include its emphasis on the worship of the one, true God and of the moral duties we have to other human beings. The fundamental Christian ethic of love is rooted directly in the Old Testament, for in Matthew 22:37–39 Jesus tells us that the two great commandments are "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5) and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (a quotation from Leviticus 19:18).

Finally, the Old Testament relates to the New by providing its prophetic context. This happens in ways that are both obvious and subtle. For example, it is obvious that the Old Testament contains prophecies that relate directly to the Christian age. Thus the book of Jeremiah contains the promise that God will establish a "new covenant" with his people, one that will be spiritually transformative, unlike the one made through Moses (Jer.

31:31–34); and on the night of his Passion, Jesus declared this prophecy fulfilled, stating, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20).

On a subtler level, we have seen how prophecies like Isaiah 7:14 (“Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”) had an initial fulfillment in the Old Testament era, but also a second and greater fulfillment in Jesus Christ (see answer 13). Many of the Psalms also contain hidden prophecies of the Messiah, such as Psalm 22:1 (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”), which Jesus applied to himself on the cross (Matt. 27:46).

Subtler yet, Paul reveals how the two wives of Abraham—Sarah and Hagar—represent the covenant made through Moses and the one made through Jesus (Gal. 4:21–31).

These messianic prophecies—whether obvious or subtle—are why Jesus, when walking with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, was able “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” to interpret “to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

18. Is the “God of the Old Testament” different from the “God of the New Testament”?

Many people are under the impression that the Old Testament depicts God as angry and jealous, whereas the New Testament depicts him as loving and kind. They then ask how these two portraits can both describe the same God, with some arguing that they can’t—that there is a fundamental contradiction in the way the two parts of the Bible depict him.

In reality, both testaments describe God the same way. Though there are differences of emphasis, there is no difference in substance. Both the Old and the New Testaments reveal God’s attributes of justice (associated with the pictures of him being angry or jealous) and mercy (associated with the pictures of him being loving and kind).

Thus in the Old Testament we do find depictions of the Lord as a jealous

God, not wanting the Israelites to fall into idolatry: “Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a graven image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:23–24).

However, anyone who reads the Old Testament also encounters many references to God as loving and kind: “The Lord [is] a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6; cf. Num. 14:18; Deut. 4:31; 2 Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:5).

In the New Testament we find many similar expressions indicating God’s love: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The New Testament even declares that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16).

However, anyone who reads the New Testament also encounters references to God’s wrath: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31; cf. Matt. 25:41; Rom. 1:18; 2 Thess. 1:8–9; Rev. 20:11–15).

Both the Old and New Testaments thus depict God as stern and as kind, as both just and merciful. Therefore, there aren’t two different Gods in the Bible, but one God who displays both attributes.

This is not to say that there are no differences in emphasis. There are, and they have to do with the different stages of God’s plan, for “God has revealed himself to man by gradually communicating his own mystery in deeds and in words” (CCC 69).

The earlier portions of Scripture were written in a very violent period, and they reflect the character of the time. In the Old Testament, polytheism was a real threat to the Israelites, and there was constant oppression and exploitation of the poor and the weak. God thus used the image of himself as a powerful, heavenly king to warn the Israelites against polytheism and oppression—the sins that are most regularly singled out for the strongest condemnation in the Old Testament.

When Jesus came, a new phase in God's plan dawned—a phase in which God made himself vulnerable and offered himself on the cross, underscoring in the most dramatic way his love for mankind. The impact of this event naturally colored the way God is revealed in the New Testament, and balances the emphases found in the Old.

Further, since the New Testament completes the Old, it is only with the arrival of God's Son that we have his full and definitive revelation of himself. "God has revealed himself fully by sending his own Son, in whom he has established his covenant forever. The Son is his Father's definitive Word; so there will be no further revelation after him" (CCC 73). The New Testament thus provides the ultimate revelation of God's love and mercy.

19. How should we apply the Old Testament today?

The writings of the Old Testament have a great deal to say to us. As Paul declares: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

Yet applying the Old Testament today must be done with care. The Church recognizes that Scripture operates on more than one level, the most fundamental giving us its "literal" sense. "The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: 'All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal'" (CCC 116).

The first step in applying a text from the Old Testament is thus identifying its literal sense: What was the original human author seeking to communicate to his audience? How would he have understood it? (See answers 4, 10, 13, and 16 for the implications this has when reading Old Testament laws, wisdom literature, prophecy, and history.)

Identifying the literal sense does not mean taking it in a woodenly literal way, but recognizing the various symbols and forms of literary expression that the ancient authors used when communicating their message.

Only after the literal sense has been correctly identified are we ready to proceed to additional meanings, which are found in the “spiritual” sense of the text. This is traditionally divided into several subsenses:

1. The *allegorical* sense. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ’s victory and also of Christian baptism.
2. The *moral* sense. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As Paul says, they were written “for our instruction.”
3. The *anagogical* sense (Greek: *anagōgē*, “leading”). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem (CCC 117).

We see the New Testament authors identifying each of these senses in various texts, and applying them for their readers. Thus Paul sees Abraham’s wives, Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16), as “an allegory” of “two covenants”—the Old and the New (Gal. 4:24). Similarly, he sees the rock which miraculously gave the Israelites water (Num. 20) as an allegory of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

Paul draws out the moral sense of various Old Testament texts where the Israelites indulged in immorality (Exod. 32:1–6; Num. 14:2, 21:6, 25:1–9) and concludes, “Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

Finally, the author of Hebrews explores how the anagogical sense of Old Testament texts in which the Israelites who disobeyed God failed to enter his rest in the promised land (e.g., Ps. 95:11)—and how the Sabbath rest itself—points forward to the eternal rest that awaits those who believe the gospel, concluding, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one

fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Heb. 4:11).

In applying lessons from the Old Testament, we also must recognize the differences between the days of the Israelites and our own. God’s plan of the ages has advanced to a new stage with the coming of Christ, involving a greater revelation of God’s love and mercy, and so we should not hastily assume that God will deal with us the same way he dealt with them. In particular, we should recognize that—except for the laws stating basic moral imperatives—the regulations he gave them (e.g., the ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Law) do not apply to us except in an allegorical or anagogical way. Similarly, the greater mercy offered in our age means that we should not fear that God’s judgment will fall on us in this life in the form of temporal calamities the way it did for them, though we must always be mindful of the eternal fate of our souls.

Ultimately, the same principles of interpretation that the New Testament authors employed are open to us today, allowing us to mine the riches of the Old Testament for a wealth of insights we can use. However, we must do so carefully, recognizing both the importance of the literal sense and the differences between the Old Testament era and the new era ushered in by Christ and his death for us on the cross.

20. How can we study the Old Testament?

We are fortunate to live in an age in which studying the Old Testament is easier than ever. Not only are Bibles common and inexpensive, but almost all of us have been blessed with an education that provided the gift of literacy.

Compared to prior ages in history, we are extraordinarily fortunate, and we can show our gratitude for the blessings we have been given by taking advantage of them and sitting down and actually reading the Old Testament—as well as the New.

In doing so, we face the choice of which Bible to read, and here again we are blessed with an abundance of options. If we prefer the elevated “King

James” language of older translations, versions such as the Catholic Douay-Rheims are available to us. So are modern translations in easy-to-read, colloquial English.

Bibles today come with introductions and notes, and some “study Bibles” contain extensive study materials. Some editions are even devoted to particular themes, such as devotion, life application, and apologetics. There are also “youth Bibles” designed to meet the needs and answer the questions of young people, as well as “365-day Bibles” designed to help you read through the entire Bible in a year.

We also are not confined to reading a single Bible, and it can be helpful to compare and contrast different translations, including non-Catholic ones, though we must be careful with the introductions and notes these contain.

Bible reading is the foundation of Bible study, and it is essential that we engage in it if we are to study the Old Testament. We need to read and think reflectively about what we have read if we are to absorb the message of God’s word.

We need not be intimidated by this project, because although the Old Testament itself is large, we can take on the task of reading and digesting individual portions of it. Pope Benedict XVI even recommended that we do so while on summer vacation:

The Bible, as the name says, is a collection of books, a small “library” that came into being in the course of a millennium. Some of these “small books” of which it is composed are almost unknown to the majority, even people who are good Christians.

Some are very short, such as the book of Tobit, a tale that contains a lofty sense of family and marriage; or the book of Esther, in which the Jewish queen saves her people from extermination with her faith and prayer; or the book of Ruth, a stranger who meets God and experiences his providence, which is even shorter. These little books can be read in an hour. More demanding and true masterpieces are the book of Job, which faces the great problem of innocent suffering; Ecclesiastes is striking

because of the disconcerting modernity with which it calls into question the meaning of life and of the world; and the Song of Songs [Song of Solomon], a wonderful symbolic poem of human love. . . .

To conclude, dear friends, today I would like to suggest that you keep the Holy Bible within reach, during the summer period or in your breaks, in order to enjoy it in a new way by reading some of its books straight through, those that are less known and also the most famous (*General Audience*, August 3, 2011).

Beyond simply reading the Old Testament, we can go deeper by participating in the many Bible studies that have been authored in our day—whether they are devoted to particular books of the Old Testament or particular themes that it contains. We can do this privately, in parish groups, or online.

In addition to Bible studies, there are also extensive commentaries on all of the books of the Old Testament, which can shed even greater light on its pages. Some of these are written on the popular level and accessible to all, whereas others go into scholarly detail for those wishing to dive deep into the mysteries of the Old Testament.

It is even possible—and easier than one might think—to begin studying the languages in which the Old Testament is written: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Classes are taught on these around the country, and there are many textbooks and language-study programs that can be used on an individual basis—allowing people to encounter God’s word in the languages in which it was composed, providing even greater insight.

Finally, we are blessed to have many additional resources that shed light on the Old Testament, including maps and atlases, books on Old Testament archaeology and culture, and numerous other resources.

Whichever path you choose in studying the Old Testament, a greater knowledge of it will benefit you by enriching your knowledge of God and his word, helping you understand the basis and background of the Christian faith, and coming to understand the scriptures that Jesus and the first

Christians read.

Timeline

- c. 2000 B.C.: Life of Abraham (early dating)
- c. 1800 B.C.: Life of Abraham (late dating)
- c. 1400 B.C.: Exodus from Egypt (early dating)
- c. 1200 B.C.: Exodus from Egypt (late dating)
- 1048 B.C.: Reign of King Saul begins
- 1009 B.C.: Reign of King David begins
- 971 B.C.: Reign of King Solomon begins
- 932 B.C.: Kingdoms of Israel and Judah separate
- 723 B.C.: Israel falls to Assyrians
- 586 B.C.: Jerusalem falls to Babylonians (temple destroyed; Exile begins)
- 515 B.C.: Rebuilt temple dedicated
- 331 B.C.: Palestine conquered by Alexander the Great
- 169 B.C.: Antiochus IV desecrates the temple (Maccabees rebel)
- 36 B.C.: Herod the Great king of Jerusalem
- 3/2 B.C.: Birth of Jesus Christ
- 1 B.C.: Death of Herod the Great
- A.D. 29: Baptism of Jesus
- A.D. 33: Crucifixion of Jesus
- A.D. 66: First Jewish Revolt begins
- A.D. 70: Jerusalem falls to Romans (temple destroyed)

For more information on these dates, see Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2011).

About the Author

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